Exploring academic stress and coping strategies among first-semester students in an ELT master's program

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Highlights
Most first-semester ELT master's students experienced high levels of academic stress. The primary sources of stress included heavy academic workloads, demands related to academic English, and limited familiarity with research-oriented tasks. In responding to these pressures, students initially relied on emotion-focused or avoidant coping strategies before gradually shifting toward more problem-focused approaches, such as planning, active problem solving, and seeking assistance from peers or instructors.

ABSTRACT: Academic stress is one of the challenges that Master's degree students encounter, especially during their first semester of study. This study aimed to investigate the level of academic stress and coping strategies of first-semester students of an ELT Master's Degree Program in Malang, Indonesia. An explanatory sequential descriptive mixed-methods approach was employed for the study. This study utilized the Educational Stress Scale for University Students (ESSA) and the Brief-COPE Inventory in gathering data on the level of academic stress and the most frequently used coping strategies. Furthermore, qualitative research approaches, particularly interviews, were conducted to investigate the impact of the situations on the academic life of the students. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping was employed as a theoretical framework for the study. The results of the study revealed that 60% of the participants experienced high academic stress, especially academic workload, time pressure, and research. Among the coping strategies, nine out of thirteen were frequently used by the participants, especially active coping, planning, and religion, which were the most dominant. Students also demonstrated a dual-phase coping strategy, where they used emotional avoidance as a coping strategy, then changed to a problem-focused coping strategy. These findings suggest the need for early academic support, including mentoring, language-sensitive instruction, and structured guidance to support students' transition into postgraduate study.

Keywords: Academic stress, coping strategies, master students, English Language Teaching.

Introduction

A significant change in academic demands is observed during the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate studies, which sometimes proves to be difficult for the freshmen in the English Language Teaching master's program. The students are expected to cope with the demands of academic writing, research, and cognitive load, besides adapting to new academic standards. The demands are further increased in the English Language Teaching program, as students are expected to demonstrate both pedagogical and English language proficiency. The fresh graduates are expected to cope with the demands of research-based learning (Gloria & Mbato, 2023), while the teachers/students are expected to balance their academic, professional, and domestic demands.

Consequently, the first semester serves as an important transitional period marked by significant adjustments. The requirement for an immediate adjustment to research-based learning, academic argumentation, and high-order writing rapidly creates a situation that is extremely stressful. However, it is an anxiety-inducing and motivation-fluctuating situation (Gloria & Mbato, 2023), given the high expectations for communicative competence and academic discourse skills (Aulia & Dalimunte, 2024; Lugman, 2022). Moreover, issues related to institutional and cultural adjustment also contributed to the problems, as the findings from Lugman (2022) about Indonesian postgraduate students echoed the domestic freshmen's journey into a challenging and unfamiliar academic environment.

In dealing with academic stress, students use coping strategies as cognitive and behavioral attempts to deal with internal and external pressures (Primadasa & Raihana, 2022). According to the COPE model developed by Carver et al. (1989), coping strategies can be divided into two types: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping includes planning, active coping, and seeking instrumental support. Emotion-focused coping includes seeking emotional support, positive reframing, acceptance, and self-regulation (Heda & Mbato, 2022). Previous studies have also shown that adaptive coping strategies, such as planning, seeking support, and positive reframing, help in reducing negative stress outcomes (Ruiz-Camacho et al., 2025). While internal resources, such as resilience and self-efficacy (Cascio et al., 2014), as well as external support systems (Liu et al., 2023; Tremolada et al., 2016), also play an important role in reducing academic strain and supporting students' engagement. In the context of ELT postgraduate studies, coping strategies are also related to language learning behavior, academic motivation, and identity formation (Naenah, 2022; Zarfsaz & Hosseini, 2023).

The existing literature on academic stress is mainly focused on the general university population and undergraduates. For instance, in a study by Basith et al. (2021), academic stress in Indonesian undergraduates was examined and revealed that academic stress is mainly affected by workload and self-imposed factors, though academic achievement does not have any direct significant correlation with academic stress. Similarly, in another study by Cleofas et al. (2023), academic stress in college students during the COVID-19 pandemic was examined by broadening the topic and positing that for general college students, academic stress is an important mediator for anxiety and quality of life during the pandemic. However, these studies are limited to the general dynamics of the undergraduate group and have not focused on the postgraduate group.

In the broader framework of English Language Teaching (ELT) studies, the literature predominantly focuses on in-service teachers or basic academic skills, rather than on the overall experience of college freshmen as it relates to postgraduate students. Heda and Mbato (2022) conducted research on stressors and resilience among EFL teachers, examining the impact of professional commitments and emotional control in the construction of their coping strategies. For master's level students, Gloria and Mbato (2023) conducted research on the key roles of motivation and metacognitive knowledge in academic writing, underlining the challenges peculiar to research writing. In addition, Kosherbayeva et al. (2024) also added to the field by reviewing psychological assessment tools used to measure stress levels. While valuable, these studies tend to analyze specific competencies or professional resilience in isolation, rather than the comprehensive psychological adaptation of new postgraduate students.

Despite this wide number of research, a distinct gap persists concerning the initial adaptation of freshmen in ELT master's programs. A limited study examines the distinct "double burden" faced by this group: the requirement to master the challenging learning curve

of advanced independent research while simultaneously exhibiting stronger educational and communicative skills. This study aims to address this issue by specifically looking into the levels of stress experienced by these students, as well as their coping mechanisms, especially during their first semester, which is a critical period in their master's studies. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the levels of academic stress experienced by first-year students in the master's program of ELT, as well as their respective coping mechanisms. Specifically, this study is guided by these following questions: 1) What levels of academic stress do first-year ELT students experience in their master's program? 2) What coping strategies do the students use to manage academic stress, and how are they implemented in practice? By addressing these questions, the study offers insights into postgraduate academic adjustment and supports the development of curriculum and support systems designed to foster resilience.

Method

Research Design

This study adopts an explanatory sequential descriptive mixed-method by combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of academic stress and the coping strategies among first-semester ELT master's students. The quantitative component was conducted first to measure the level of academic stress and identify the types and frequencies of the coping strategies, followed by the qualitative component, which delves further into the participants' individual coping experiences. Although a survey method alone would provide only the incidence of stress, this mixed-methods framework is particularly useful in adding value to such a design, whereby the statistical trends from the students' responses can be explained by the researcher through the students' lived experiences, revealing a nuanced reality of student stress. This idea is supported by Cohen et al. (2018). This design thus matches the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping by Lazarus & Folkman (1984), which maintains that individuals' responses to stress involve both cognitive appraisals and behavioral adaptations that can best be conceptualized through a blend of measurable trends and narrative depth.

Research Participants

The participants consisted of 35 freshmen students derived from the total population of 60 active students in the ELT master's program for the academic year 2025-2026 in one of the universities located in Malang. Although the number of participants for the study is considered small as compared with the standard survey research population size, it represents the majority of the population and is considered adequate for descriptive statistical analysis to identify the dominant stress patterns among the members of the group. For the qualitative research part of the study, the purposive sampling design was also considered for the selection of the participants for the in-depth interview. Three participants were selected for the interview. The participants were chosen based on the different statuses they were in with regards to academic transitions. These include the Direct Entry students, students with a gap in their entries, and the Fast Track students.

Research Instruments

In this research, two questionnaires and a semi-structured interview were used as major tools in collecting the required data. These tools were chosen and adapted in such a way that they became appropriate for the context of Indonesian ELT masters' freshmen in relation to academic stress and coping.

The level of academic stress was measured by the use of the Educational Stress Scale for University Students (ESSA), which was developed from the original form of the Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents. Though originally designed for students in secondary institutions,

the instrument's original form was modified by Dewi et al. in 2025 to make it linguistically and conceptually relevant to university students. On a closer scrutiny by the ELT expert lecturer of the current need in the postgraduate environment, the instrument was further refined to 9 items measuring stress related to master's students. These items include stress related to workload, stress related to grades, and personal self-expectation. To make the instrument reliable on its own, a reliability examination or Cronbach's alpha test was performed on the major data gathered. The results showed a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.841, which means it was highly reliable. Thus, the 9-item scale on the ESSA instrument was also validated to be reliable in this study. Each item on this instrument was measured using a five-point Likert scale, with scores ranging from 1, or strongly disagree, to 5, or strongly agree, where higher scores correspond to higher levels of academic stress.

To assess students' coping methods, the study employed a modified version of the BRIEF-COPE scale (Carver, 1997). This version was specifically tailored to address the unique academic, linguistic, and research problems encountered by EFL master's students. A significant cultural adaptation was applied to the Substance Use subscale. The pilot study indicated that the original items concerning alcohol and drugs were inapplicable to this demographic. Therefore, they were replaced with "physiological escape behaviors" such as overeating and oversleeping. The final instrument consists of 23 items. It is divided into problem-focused active coping, planning, and instrumental support; emotion-focused (positive reframing, religion, humor, venting, emotional support, acceptance, and distraction); and maladaptive styles (self-blame, behavioral disengagement, and substance use), with a 4-point Likert frequency scale used to measure them.

To obtain more information, semi-structured interviews were conducted on a sample of participants to gain a deeper understanding of how students cope with academic stress in real-life situations. A set of interview questions was developed according to Lazarus & Folkman's (1984) Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping. The objective was to determine how students cope with academic stress, how students perceive academic stress, how students cope, and what students do when they are under academic stress. Questions focused on important components of the stress-coping process, such as sources of stress, student perceptions of challenge, coping choice, and reflections on the consequences of such strategies. Open-ended interview questions were used to allow participants to freely express their thoughts while being related to the study's theoretical background. Sample questions included inquiries into primary appraisal, such as *"Can you tell me about one academic situation that has made you feel most stressed lately?"* and *"In your opinion, what made the situation feel so threatening to your academic goals?"* To assess coping resources, participants were asked, *"What specific steps did you take first to overcome the problem?"* and, *"Did you see this situation as a challenge or a threat?"*

Although the number of interview participants was limited to three, this sample size was deemed adequate based on the principle of information power (Malterud et al., 2016). Given the study's specific intent to investigate the transition mechanism and the high quality of dialogue established with these selected cases, representing distinct entry pathways (Direct, Gap, and Fast-Track), these participants held sufficient experiential depth to offer extensive information about the varied coping trajectories within the cohort.

Data Collection

Quantitative data collection was conducted by using an online questionnaire. The Stress Scale for University Students (ESSA) and the BRIEF-COPE scale proposed by Carver (1997) were used for this study. For the qualitative part of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected participants. Three participants were chosen for the interviews.

The interviews were conducted to gather more information about the coping styles of the participants. Questions were asked about the sources of academic stress, emotions, behavior, and the context.

Data Analysis

The data analysis procedure was conducted in several stages, corresponding to each research question and data gathered. The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 25. To address the first research question regarding the level of academic stress, this study employed descriptive statistical methods to look at the responses to the Educational Stress Scale for University Students (ESSA). Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale, and individual students' total stress scores were obtained by summing the scores across the nine items. The possible score range therefore extended from 9 (minimum) to 45 (maximum). The total score was divided into three equal intervals using the following formula:

$$Interval = \frac{Maximum\ Score - Minimum\ score}{Number\ of\ Categories\ (3)}$$

Based on this calculation, with an interval width of 12, the stress levels were classified as low (9–20), moderate (21–32), and high (33–44). Frequencies and percentages were then calculated to determine the distribution of students across each stress category. The resulting scoring matrix is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Matrix for the Academic Stress Level

Level of Academic Stress	**Total Score Range (9 Items)**
Low Level	9 – 20
Moderate Level	21 - 32
High Level	33 - 45

In order to answer the second research question on coping strategies, the data from the adapted BRIEF-COPE questionnaire were analyzed by calculating the mean score of each coping strategy subscale. The coping strategy with the highest mean score indicates the most frequently used by the students. The mean scores of each coping strategy subscale were computed using the statistical program SPSS version 25. To determine the frequency of strategy use, the mean scores of each coping strategy subscale were grouped into three levels based on an equal interval of 1.00 on the 4-point scale, which are Rarely Used (1.00-2.00), Occasionally Used (2.01-3.00), and Frequently Used (3.01-4.00), as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Frequency of Coping Strategy

Mean Score Range	**Frequency Category**
1.00 – 2.00	Rarely Used
2.01 – 3.00	Occasionally Used
3.01 – 4.00	Frequently Used

The qualitative data analysis utilizes Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (TTSC). This theory explains the ongoing process by which people assess whether academic demands exceed their ability to cope. This theory also serves as a guide in coding the qualitative data thematically related to the complex interactions that take place between students and their environment. The coding is based on the identification of themes in relation to the reason for the stress experienced (primary appraisal), the assessment in relation

to support or capabilities (secondary appraisal), and the actual coping in relation to the stress experienced. This study aims to explain the causes of stress and the coping strategies used by new students in the ELT Master's program, using relevant theoretical ideas.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

Academic Stress Level of ELT Master's Freshmen

The quantitative results from the Educational Stress Scale for University Students (ESSA) show that most first-semester students in the ELT master's program experienced a high level of academic stress. As shown in Figure 1, out of the 35 students surveyed, 60% reported high academic stress, whereas the remaining 40% reported moderate academic stress. No students experienced a low level of academic stress. This study is in line with previous research findings that the first semester of postgraduate studies is characterized by academic adaptation, which involves a heavy workload, complex reading and writing skills, and the acquisition of research skills (Damayanti & Rachmawati, 2022; Gloria & Mbato, 2023).

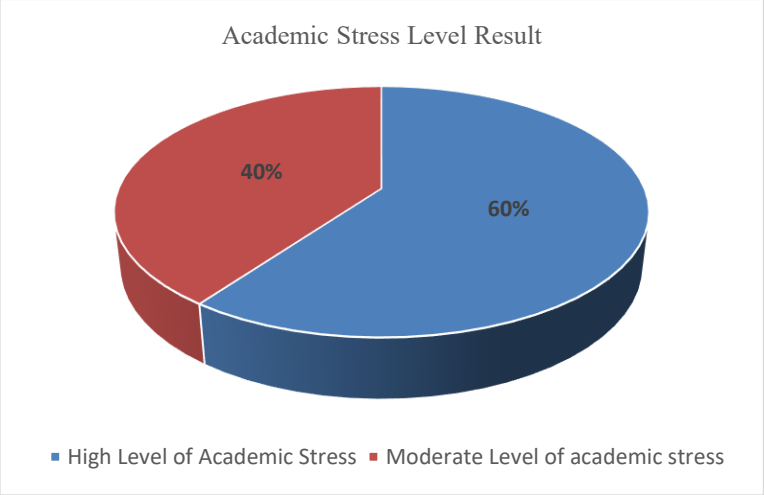

Figure 1 Students' Academic Stress Level

Furthermore, the qualitative data helps reveal the reason behind the level of stress observed in the students' responses. For instance, the students were frequently concerned about the number of tasks they had, the deadlines, and the feeling of being rushed. Participant A described, *"The assignments pile up… they come at the same time… it feels like there's no breathing space."* Participant B similarly stated, *"When I finish one, three more appear… It feels like I'm constantly chasing them."*

Internal pressure was another contributing factor in the stress formation, as observed in the students' responses, often driven by fear of failure or a strong desire to perform well in class. Participant C expressed, *"I'm really scared of getting a lower grade… it feels like a complete failure."* These internal and external pressures are closely similar to the ESSA dimensions, such as workload and self-expectation, as observed in previous studies concerning academic stress (Basith et al., 2021).

The study's findings reveal that students are exposed to different types of internal and external stressors. The study also highlights the significance of self-expectation and workload as significant stressors. The high levels of stress in critical areas also emphasize the importance

of academic counseling and stress management for students in graduate programs by helping them cope with the challenges associated with higher academic programs.

Types of Coping Strategies Used by the Students

The second research question explored the most common coping strategies used by first-semester ELT master's students. The average scores of the thirteen subscales of the modified BRIEF-COPE tool are presented in Table 3. To make the information more understandable and to avoid confusion between the concepts, the strategies are grouped into three major categories: problem-focused, emotion-focused, and maladaptive coping strategies.

From the results in Table 3, nine of the thirteen subscales were classified as "frequently used" (3.01-4.00), while the remaining four were classified as "occasionally used" (2.01-3.00). No strategies were classified as rarely used. The implication is that students engage actively and frequently with a wide range of coping strategies, as opposed to using only one form of coping, indicating a pattern of coping flexibility, whereby different strategies are used depending on the nature of the stressor. Of the most frequently used, problem-focused coping strategies were prominent, with Active Coping and Planning scoring the highest, at M=3.47 and M=3.41, respectively, followed closely by Religion, at M=3.40, as the highest-rated emotion-focused coping strategy. Other emotion-focused strategies were also categorized as frequently used. Distraction (M = 3.33) and Positive Reframing (M = 3.31) indicate that students tried to shift their attention from stressful academic demands and view difficult situations in a more manageable way. Acceptance (M = 3.31) suggests that students tended to recognize academic pressure as part of their learning process, especially when the source of stress could not be easily changed.

Meanwhile, Venting (M = 3.07), although close to the lower boundary of the frequently used category, shows that some students used emotional expression as a way to release tension before returning to more focused academic action. Notably, Behavioural Disengagement, with an average of 3.24, also fell within the range of "frequently used", implying that disengagement also has its place, even though it might not be as adaptive as the other coping strategies. This finding does not necessarily suggest that students relied on problematic coping. Rather, this result is consistent with the two-stage process discovered in the qualitative findings. The students withdrew for an emotional phase before transitioning into more active, problem-oriented responses after the feelings of overwhelming had subsided. Students made the least use of the four coping strategies that fell within the range of "occasionally used", which are Emotional Support, with an average of 2.90; Self-Blame, with an average of 2.69; Instrumental Support, with an average of 2.51; and Physiological Escape, with an average of 2.46.

Table 3
Mean of Coping Strategies used by the students

Category	Coping Strategy	Mean (M)	Frequency Category
Problem-Focused	Active Coping	3.47	Frequently Used
	Planning	3.41	Frequently Used
	Instrumental Support	2.51	Occasionally Used
Emotion-Focused	Religion	3.40	Frequently Used
	Distraction	3.33	Frequently Used
	Positive Reframing	3.31	Frequently Used
	Acceptance	3.31	Frequently Used

	Humour	3.26	Frequently Used
	Venting	3.07	Frequently Used
	Emotional Support	2.90	Occasionally Used
Maladaptive	Behavioural Disengagement	3.24	Frequently Used
	Self-Blame	2.69	Occasionally Used
	Physiological Escape (Substance Use)	2.46	Occasionally Used

How Students Cope with Their Academic Stress

The results of the semi-structured interviews showed that the coping strategy of the first-year ELT Master's program students is a two-stage coping strategy. This is in accordance with the dynamic transactional model of stress appraisal, as discussed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). First, the responses of the students are primarily affective, with a sense of avoidance, especially when the students encounter academic challenges that are deemed too hard or beyond their capabilities. However, a large number of the students also exhibit more adaptive coping, especially when deadlines are near or when they feel that they are in control of their academic workload.

Phase 1 — Emotional or Avoidant Responses

When stress peaks, students often rely on emotional escape behaviors, especially oversleeping. Participant A shared, *"Whether I'm sleepy or not, I force myself to sleep, so I don't have to think about it."* Participant B added, *"From 4 pm until dawn… that's really my escape."* Participant C echoed this pattern with, *"When I'm really overwhelmed… I take one day off… just sleep."*

Notably, avoidance also occurs in social form. Students sometimes withdraw from their peers when overwhelmed. Participant A stated, *"I don't tell anyone… I prefer to be alone."* This reflects a reluctance to seek external support even when it might be helpful. In some cases, avoidant coping also had physical consequences. For instance, participant C reported that she had been sick for a week after pulling consecutive all-nighters. These initial reactions align with Carver's definition of behavioural disengagement and the emotional-focused stage in the Transactional Model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, over time, Participant A realized that relying solely on herself was ineffective, stating in reflection, *"It turns out we can't stand on our own... I have to learn to seek help*." This self-awareness marks an important developmental shift, aligning with the secondary appraisal in the Transactional Model, where students begin to reassess their coping resources.

Phase 2 — Transition to Problem-Focused Coping

After the stress is temporarily reduced, students begin to use more adaptive strategies. This is evident in Participant B's statement, *"When I'm stuck, I contact a friend, ask for insight."* Likewise, Participant C states, *"When I'm stuck… I ask friends or AI."* Participant A also states, *"Eventually, I start working on my assignments bit by bit."*

Another form of instrumental support is the use of AI. Participant B states, *"First thing first, I definitely use AI… it's very helpful."* Students used AI to brainstorm ideas, understand instructions, and initiate tasks, reflecting contemporary forms of academic assistance. This is an important finding, as it represents a contemporary form of academic support. Humour is another social coping strategy. This is evidenced by Participant B's comment that jokes and

memes are used in group chats to promote a sense of struggle among peers. This is similar to the "frequently used" for the concept of humour, with an average rating of M = 3.26. These findings indicate that emotional coping is a preliminary buffer before the more adaptive problem-focused coping is employed.

In conclusion, the coping behavior of the freshmen in the ELT Master's program may be summarized as a dynamic process of: emotional avoidance (sleeping, distraction, withdrawal), followed by a brief feeling of relief, then academic pressure, and finally the shift to more adaptive problem-focused coping (planning, active coping, and instrumental support), supplemented by emotional, spiritual, and social coping (humour and support from peers). This complex process of postgraduate adjustment indicates that while the students have the capacity to employ adaptive coping mechanisms, their overall coping behavior is initiated from a position of emotional overwhelm.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that there is substantial academic pressure faced by first-semester ELT master's students, this being attributed to their heavy workload, closely entwined deadlines, and linguistically challenging nature of post-graduation academic pursuit itself. These results tend to support previous studies that view this initial transitional phase in post-graduation as a 'pressure cooker' era wherein a dramatic transition towards self-directed research takes place (Gloria & Mbato, 2023). More specifically, participants' experience of 'piling up' their assignments closely resonate with studies that identify workload and self-expectation pressure as principal predictors of academic pressure in a post-secondary setting (Basith et al., 2021; Cleofas et al., 2023). Finally, the emergence of linguistics-related anxiety tends to support previous observations that language proficiency issues continue to play a pivotal role within ELT students' perception of their perceived difficulty within their first transitional phase (Aulia & Dalimunte, 2024; Lugman, 2022).

The findings further demonstrated adaptability by employing multiple adaptive mechanisms to manage study-related issues and stress effectively, with nine out of thirteen strategies rated as "frequently used". Active coping and planning were among the favored adaptive strategies. The prevalence of problem-focused strategies for managing issues and stress indicates a strong capacity for resilience among the individuals. The significance of religion, distraction, and acceptance indicates that religious approaches to addressing external challenges are vital to Indonesian society (Heda & Mbato, 2022). Interestingly, the less adaptive coping styles such as Physiological Escape (M = 2.46) and Self-Blame (M = 2.69) were also classified as Occasionally Used. This indicates that although avoidant coping exists among the students, they do not tend to use harmful coping mechanisms.

This study presents a new finding that Artificial Intelligence (AI) serves as an instrumental support. This finding has conceptual implications by expanding the concept of instrumental coping for this scale, which typically involves seeking assistance or help from others, such as classmates or teachers. In this study, AI is utilized as a "non-human cognitive scaffold," which helps students solve problems quickly when they need assistance. By receiving help from AI with regard to understanding confusing assignment instructions, generating ideas for an assignment, or receiving help with organizing drafts for an assignment, students reduce their own cognitive overload for the task at hand. This outcome indicates that technology is now an initial source of academic support when students feel stuck. This allows a student to move from a state of fear to action in a shorter period.

However, this also brings about a new problem. While AI relieves a student from a lot of stress in a practical sense, it raises ethical concerns and issues of dependence. There is a fear that relying heavily on AI for idea generation may prevent a student from developing autonomous critical thinking skills and may affect academic integrity by causing unintentional plagiarism. So, AI becomes a coping mechanism that requires a balanced use to avoid overpowering a student's intellectual development.

Conclusion

This study shows that first-semester ELT master's students experience academic stress due to work demands, time constraints, and language requirements in their postgraduate studies. Regarding coping strategies, the majority of the thirteen coping strategies were frequently used by the participants, and the problem-focused coping strategies, particularly active coping and planning, received the highest ratings, whereas religion ranked as the highest among emotion-focused coping strategies and the third overall across all thirteen subscales. The coping process for the participants' academic stress consisted of two stages: emotional avoidance and problem-solving coping, with AI representing a new type of instrumental coping beyond the traditional coping strategy framework.

The present research's implications for practice are significant in that they indicate the need for academic support and guidance in the early stages of postgraduate studies and for the implementation of language-aware instruction and AI literacy instruction to help students adapt to postgraduate studies. The current research limitations include its single-institution context and small sample. Future studies should focus on large-scale longitudinal studies to examine the development of academic stress and coping strategies in the context of academic learning and the long-term impact of AI-assisted coping on academic self-efficacy.

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